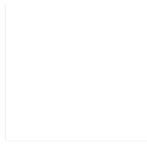


From: [NSW Government](#)
To: [Flood Inquiry](#)
Subject: Floods Inquiry
Date: Wednesday, 6 April 2022 10:20:37 AM



Your details

Title	Mrs
First name	Helen
Last name	Robinson

Email

Submission details

I am making this submission as	Emergency services personnel
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Submission type	I am making a personal submission
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Your position in the organisation (if applicable)	I am the North Lismore Flood Coordinator liaising between community and SES. Also a volunteer fire fighter
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Consent to make submission public	I give my consent for this submission to be made public
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Share your experience or tell your story

Your story	Sun 27th - helped people lift out of predicted flood. Helped CWA (Spinks Park Lismore) enact the flood plan I'd written - much was removed to our homes. Went to bed very tired at 8pm. Woke at 2am, checked BOM and discovered Lismore was headed for a catastrophe. Went on to
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Facebook and talking to lots of people in North and some in south and some in Browns Creek Basin. Discouraging people from going into attic spaces, organising a flotilla of boats to start rescuing at first light. Without looking at river (I live at Tullera) I could tell by the numbers on BOM the water was rising very fast and was probably flowing much faster than the people of the flood zone were used to. I put appeals out to boat owners to get to Dunoon Rd by 1st light and for drivers to ferry people away from the impromptu boat ramp. We had the first boat in the water by 6 and in torrential rain that persisted until about 2 rescued maybe 100 people with the 10 boats and 2 jet skis that turned up. Others in our awesome community opened up Tullera Hall for us to take the evacuees to. Others turned up with dry clothes, towels, food and hot drinks. Later Modanville School (which has a couple of showers) was opened up and later still Dunoon Sports Club. People turned up with everything the evacuees and their pets needed. Later in the day people turned up to offer many of the evacuees homes for the duration. We brought a lady and her dog (the criteria was that her dog was good with cats - we have 2 17 year olds) home to our place. Two weeks after being rescued and lost her cat was found so it also came to us. It had to stay locked in the bedroom. Mel (lady), Archie (dog) and Puddah (cat) stayed with us until Friday 26th March when their home was sufficiently dry and clean to return home. They came back to us that Sunday as flood was threatening and while it was most unlikely this one would flood her house she was stressed. Flood didn't enter her house but it went down so very slowly it was not until Fri 2nd April that they could return home again. Meanwhile my husband, Jim, and I hosed roads (very slippery wet mud on them) houses and businesses as part of the RFS. Jim also helped other volunteers clean Mel's house and bring equipment home to clean and dry and get running again - we think the electric whipper

snipper might work but are giving it a bit more time to dry out. Even with lots of support Mel has lost so very much. She managed to salvage most her clothes and some photos and a few bits and pieces but that's it. Mel is 70, she has a mortgage and is on a pension. Jim and I work full time, although that was on hold for 5 weeks for me and 2 weeks for him plus the days we couldn't go anywhere because of floods, we are both 68. After 2 weeks of dragging hoses and hosing buildings I took a break and did other things to support the community including driving supplies to recovery centres for the RFS.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#)

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

We had a LOT of rain, about 1m over 3 days for many places in most of the catchment. Many had over 500mm during the night of the 27th. The catchment is over 1,000km². The water races down to Lismore and hits a flood plain that at the Rowing Club (our official flood gauge) the river is 19m above sea level. The river is tidal well above this, approximately to Boatharbour and Goolmangar. The river then travels well over 100km to get to Ballina. The average gradient of the river from Lismore to Ballina is therefore somewhere less than 0.00019m/m. Not sure of numbers but think most gutters on houses need a steeper gradient to ensure the water drains. As with almost all disasters this one occurred because people live and work where extreme natural events, flooding in this case, are common.

1.2 Preparation and planning

I spent a good deal in time on Sunday 27th. Firstly taking one of our fire trucks in to get fuel because we were expecting a flood and being close to town we are called to help when the flood goes down. I went back to town to help people prepare, including the CWA.

I am an avid student of weather having done substantial study in hydrology and disaster in my undergraduate studies including mapping all major rainfall events in our River system since records began in Casino in the 1840s. I read all that the BOM provides and expected that the flood would be major but that whether the levee overtopped or not would be close.

I thought the town was about as well prepared for the coming flood as they possibly could be. Businesses had lifted. People had mostly cleared out under houses. Low lying houses had lifted. So much better prepared than 2017. I honestly thought that given what was forecast Lismore was as well prepared as it could be and the if the flood didn't overtop the levee people might be cross for all the work they'd put in for nothing.

As it turned out it was all for nothing as very few had managed to lift higher than the flood that happened when that horrendous rain system came in and stalled over our valley.

While the local SES had always predicted a possible flood of 1.6m over 54/74 levels. This one was 1.8m above 54/74.

The only way we could have been better prepared was have about 3,000 removalists trucks in Lismore on that Sunday and emptied all the homes and many of the businesses. Not sure where they would have come from, why they would have been called for or where they would then park safely until the water and mud was out so things could be moved back.

All agencies in the area Council, SES, RFS were all well prepared for the flood that was predicted. I am not criticising the BOM, i understand the immense difficulties in forecasting something as fickle as our weather.

1.3 Response to floods

As mentioned I woke at 2am, read the BOM's warning issued shortly after 10pm and started talking to many many people all of whom had reasonable worries and fears for the evolving situation.

We put boats in the water and rescued people

from North Lismore, particularly at first the area NE of the railway line because nobody else could get to them. Aiden rescued a lot in his area of North Lismore.

Eventually other boats we put in the river on the other side of town. By 2pm, some in the water at 6am, our crews were tired and there were dozens of boats in the water from the other side of town, so many so that it was felt no longer safe for our crews so they packed up and went home after rescuing so many people.

There have been complaints about lack of SES and Police but I wonder how there could have been more. Perhaps there could be some central flying squad type organisation in Newcastle or somewhere but we can't possibly have the numbers needed for this rescue in every little town. It really does have to come down to the spontaneous volunteers in massive disasters. If there was a central body, they wouldn't have been able to get here in time, roads were blocked everywhere, planes couldn't fly the weather was so bad. This I appreciate would have been significant in the ADF arriving here. Our town and area could not have coped had it not been for the huge number of ADF personnel. Also came hundreds of volunteers from SES and RFS from all around the state as well as members of NSF&R.

The Red Cross and Salvation Army plus lots more spontaneous volunteers turned up at evacuation centres to help the evacuees. NSW Govt staff arrived - again complaints about their delayed arrival - don't know if this is fact or rumour but do understand that there aren't just disaster staff sitting around in every town and when a disaster happens transporting people and supplies is a huge problem.

Southern Cross University has, and continues, to play such a massive role in response and recovery. They opened up to everyone.

Evacuation centre was in the gym, NSW Recovery Centre was in Arts (V block) and Resilient Lismore (a group of spontaneous

volunteers) set up in that area providing goods. St V de P, banks, Red Cross and others set up in the Recovery Centre to aid the many thousands.

The Police Station moved from their flooded building to Education. The command centre for the response and recovery is there as well.

All the credit unions set up in the Plaza. The business hub set up in another building (haven't been there yet as the main effect the flood has had on my business is the time I've taken away from it for other tasks). Now after the second flood all the ATMs are in the car park.

Importantly also the only functioning coffee shop in the town.

1.4 Transition from incident response to recovery

The transition began in Lismore and probably surrounds while the people of the lower river were still very much in the response phase.

I went around North Lismore the 2nd night after the flood went down enough to access the town, I think the Thursday - the days have blurred a bit. CWA on the Gold Coast sent 1,000 warm meals to Lismore. I delivered a couple of dozen to people who were already back in their homes. They were effectively camping in the room they had cleaned and dried. Others I met had set up camping enclaves at the Showground.

These were families who were happy to be in their family group with no outsiders. Some of the people in North Lismore and at the Showground had serious chronic illnesses which made living in the communal setting of Evacuation Centres unsafe with the COVID spread that had been happening in our town before the flood and was likely to get much worse. They were all amazingly cheerful and getting on with it.

I estimate about 30 - 40% of people of North and South Lismore have now, 5th April, moved back home. I'm sorry I've not had time to spend much time over the other side of town but at a brief glance it looks like about the same numbers. More are moving back every day.

Life in their homes isn't quite what it was but it is their home, they feel safe and can get on with

the work and importantly are there to protect what they have from looters. There was a lot of looting on the nights of Sunday 27th and Monday 28th. This was reported to me by people who saw it happening in neighbouring houses as the flood rose around them. Also a couple of idiots boasted about it on social media.

Essential Energy set up in East Lismore Bolo car park and people went there and registered. They then dispatched electricians, many from the Gold Coast, to rewire power boards and put in two power points on the power boards so people could run extension cords inside and get fans going to dry houses as well as lighting and cooking etc. This was a huge help for people moving back.

The emergency money, \$300 I think, given out by Red Cross and St V de P was most welcome to those who applied for it and got it in that first two weeks. Mind you they had to get to Goonellabah to spend it and many had lost their cars.

Lifeline at the Showground, Resilience Lismore at the Uni and eventually Koori Mail in Molesworth St plus another crew on Wyrallah Rd were essential providers of cleaning products, clothing and food. Yellow Sky also provided washing machines and showers. Hundreds of people took washing home with them and brought it back to their owners.

Many religious, community and spontaneous groups provided meals to people during the first two weeks.

Hundreds of spontaneous volunteers from Bangalow and the Gold Coast and further afield arrived to help. Residents were particularly heartened by the enthusiasm of the troops of high school kids from Bangalow and the Samoan and Fijian works from the meatworks in Casino. Some business also were roaming streets giving out food and other essentials. I enjoyed the sandwich given to me by City Toyota on a hosing day when I really needed it.

The 3 x \$1,000 was also gratefully received and

was very helpful once 3 shops - Farmer Charlies then Spar then Woolworths supermarket opened up on the flood plain.

1.5 Recovery from floods

Lismore and other villages and towns in this river system will recover. It is the nature of people to generally pick themselves up and move on. How often and how well we can do it is the question. It is only 5 years since the 2017 flood, now this Great Flood, is so much worse.

Should we as individuals and community keep on repairing and replacing?

Most settlements here are river towns because that was how we moved people and goods. Then Lismore was tied to the railway for the same reason. This is no longer the case. People no longer walk to work and school. They almost all drive in this area another kilometre is not going to make any difference. All our goods come in by road and the majority of visitors come by air. It is possible towns like Coraki, Woodburn, Wardell, Ballina would benefit greatly from dykes or levees. The topography of those towns and the flood height in them lends themselves to this solution.

Lismore however is not suitable for levees. The ones we have have been good at doing what they were designed for, keeping the small floods out of Browns Creek and to a lesser extent South Lismore.

The height of the floods here because of the relatively narrow flood plain will always be so much greater than down river. A levee surrounding Browns Creek Basin of a height big enough to protect the town from the Great Flood will need to be about 5m higher than the current one. Then when it overtops it will be a much greater catastrophe for that basin than the Great Flood has been.

When it doesn't overtop the volume of water displaced by the levee will destroy North and South Lismore.

Those proposing channels don't understand the

topography nor the volume of water nor the gradient of the river. Those proposing dams have not thought this through either. Huge dams, we don't have many upstream valleys big enough, that sit there empty and then drown everything behind them when they fill up. Not even going to think about the biodiversity of the potential valleys.

Every single person except one, and that's a lot of people, when I've asked "what do you think should be done" has responded, "move to higher ground" or something similar.

The argument against this is the cost. Yes it would be huge. But what is the \$ cost of this flood? and can we do it all again in a couple of years?

The residents are willing indeed keen to have their homes moved to higher ground, or to live in different homes, opinions vary on this one.

As for business, about 1/3 of Lismore's CBD, shops and offices, was vacant before the flood. Clearly the same amount of space is not needed. This coupled with changing business and transport practices means a rethink is overdue. Light industry is more challenging but appropriate could be found.

All in consultation with the people but of course not being bogged down by the consultation. For this reason we are proposing a reconstruction authority, in fact most of us are flabbergasted that such an authority doesn't exist already.

What needs to be considered is the actual cost of this flood, not just the bit of money the governments and the insurance companies are paying out but the whole cost. The cost of me and thousands of others taking months off work to hose, support, repair; the cost of the ADF, the cost of NSWFR, the cost of repairing homes out of private pockets knowing full well this could happen again next month; the cost of years of anxiety; the cost of lost business, the cost of people moving away from our towns there are so many costs that a team of actuaries could

calculate and then compare to the cost of moving the town. What must be remembered is that whatever the cost has been it is going to happen again and again.

How many times can we cope?

How many times can we rinse and repeat?

Do we really expect a different result if we keep doing things the same way?

1.6 Any other matters

If there is any way I can help this enquiry please let me know. I have a Masters in Disaster Preparedness and Recovery and have a huge number of contacts in this community. Thank you for providing the opportunity to contribute.

Supporting documents or images
